Tales of Hoffman— And Other Tales

By Harriette Underhill

Aaron Hoffman, who wrote "Friendly Enemies" with Sam Shipman, sounds as though he would be tall and lean and ethereal looking.

You would fancy that he lived in Greenwich Village, or, at least, in Washington Square, and ate no meat. That his hair was long and brushed straight back from a forehead that was high and serene. You would fancy that he read the plays of dead and gone morbid minded persons, and hoped some day to emulate them. This, mind you, is not because he wrote "Friendly Enemies," but because his name is Aaron Hoffman. Now, there is Sam Shipman! We fancy him plump and good-natured, and not at all high brow, and very entertaining, just because his name is Sam Shipman. And probably he isn't like that at all, because Aaron Hoffman is like that, and not in the least like the beautiful, cadaverious man whom we had pictured going about with a portfolio containing manuscripts under his arm.

We should have suspected that he was of the earth earthy, when we learned that he conducted his business in an office on the fourteenth floor of the Times Building, instead of in a studio in Washington Mews; but when he stepped from the elevator and into his office we carried with us the vision of a tall, foreign looking youth, with black hair brushed straight back form a high, noble brow. And then we were ushered into Mr. Hoffman's office, and because a pleasant, well-fed, up-to-date person greeted us we said: "Our appointment is with Mr. Hoffman, please." And the up-to-date person said: "Yes, I am Mr. Hoffman."

We stood up under the blow without brushing our hands in front of our eyes the way Madge Kennedy does when she is adjusting her equilibrium; and, having fully recovered our savoir faire, we said "Oh!"

"Now," said Mr. Hoffman, "sit down." We sat down. "You came to interview me, didn't you. And its certainly very kind of you, but I'm not a good talker," and then Mr. Hoffman proceeded to prove that he was.

He talked along, skipping lightly from subject to subject and interrupted only by the roar of the new subway, which is almost like the roar of Niagara Falls.

"You know, I've been in this business all my life, and I've done burlesque, musical comedy, vaudeville and everything, as well as serious drama. I must tell you about writing 'Friendly Enemies.'

"Sam and I were so used to working together that it was the easiest thing in the world to write that play. First he would think of a good line and then I would think of one, and every time either of us would think of a new comedy line both of us would throw up our hands and groan.

"'There, now you've done it.' Sam would cry. 'There's a corking line for Louis Mann and where's one for Sam Bernard? Get busy now and think up as good a one for Bernard. Remember, "Friendly enemies" must not be merely titular.'

"So I would set to work and think up something, and Sam would say, 'No, that won't do. It isn't clever enough.' And finally he would come out with a whale of a line and then I would groan and say, 'That's for Bernard. Now, we never can match that for Mann.'

"And that's the way we wrote the play. And after it was finished we thought we had a surefire hit, and we put it on without even the usual amount of trepidation, and after the first night in Atlantic City" (at least, we think he said Atlantic City)" every one on earth had suggestions to make.

"'Cut it here! Cut it there! The first act ought to be where the third is, and vice versa. You've got a great idea, but it's all worked out wrong. Now, if you'll take my advice,' and so on.

"Well, we all got panicky, including Mr. Woods, and, will you believe it? we wrote that play all over and started to rehearse it so that we could use the new version in New York.

"And then along came little Georgie Cohan. You know who George is? Yes, I thought so. He's a fairly well known actor. Well, George came over to see our play, and when the curtain went down on the last act he rushed to Mr. Woods and said: 'Great! You've got a rare thing there. Don't let any one change a line, a word or a syllable.'

"So we decided to leave it as it was for a try-out in the metropolis, at any rate, and you know what happened. I think they liked it. Don't you? And if it hadn't been for George Cohan we would have used a new version of 'Friendly Enemies,' and then, possibly, our audiences would not have been so friendly."

And Mr. Hoffman went over to the elevator with us, pushed the button, and when the great pigeon-blood ruby which means "Down" appeared over the top of the iron gate he left us and rushed back into his office to write another play like "Friendly Enemies."

Week of Gilbert And Sullivan by American Singers

The Society of American Singers, sampling operas for the season at the Park Theatre, selected "The Mikado." Now "Pirates of Penzance" is scheduled for this week.

Gilbert and Sullivan revivals are not mere theatrical events—they are family reunions. Generations of theatregoers and non-theatregoers have been audiences at Gilbert and Sullivan productions—professional and amateur—that have swept the country from season to season, and every time there is a new Gilbert and Sullivan revival the old folk and the youngest generation join the regular theatregoers of the family, and everybody compares notes on the companies of yesterday, to-day and forever! The last New York Gilbert and Sullivan revival was the all-star Casino organization of the Brady-Shubert forces. Before that came the "H. M. S. Pinafore" revival at the Hippodrome.

But the memories of such a Gilbert and Sullivan expert, for instance, as John McGhie, who is conducting the present revivals at the Park Theatre, go back to the J. O. Duff company and to the early history of Gilbert and Sullivan in America. Gilbert and Sullivan had been collaborating for seven years, and had already produced "Thespis," "Trial by Jury," "The Sorcerer" and "H. M. S. Pinafore," which had not been a success at first, but which eventually ran 700 nights at the London Opéra Comique, when they brought their own company to New York in 1879 and produced "H. M. S. Pinafore" here. Lacking international copyright laws, to protect the rights of the English authors in America every aspirant for managerial fame and dollars was free to produce the reigning success of London and New York without a penny to pay in royalty, and "H. M. S. Pinafore" swept the country like wildfire.

There were church choir companies, juvenile companies, and "H. M. S. Pinafore" flooded the stage with entirely raw recruits. Some of the better church choir companies clung together and for years their annual "revivals" of Gilbert and Sullivan were features of every theatrical season throughout the United States. The most famous of them, the Boston Ideal Company and the Chicago Church Choir Company, two aggregations of splendid singers, combined as "The Bostonians."

To secure the American rights for their next opera, after their experience with "H. M. S. Pinafore," Gilbert and Sullivan brought out "The Pirates of Penzance; or, The Slave to Duty," first in New York in 1879, and the next year, in London, it ran for nearly 400 nights. "The Mikado; or, The Town of Titipu," was first announced in 1885 and proved the most generally popular of the operas in England and of lasting popularity here. For the present revivals of "The Mikado" and "Pirates of Penzance" the Society of American Singers have recruited heavily from the all-star Casino cast, Gilbert and Sullivan experts all.

Chamber Music Society

The New York Chamber Music Society will give the first of three concerts at Aeolian Hall on Tuesday evening, November 12. It was announced that André Tourret, former first violinist of the society, would return this season to resume his post. His enforced absence in France now precludes this, so that Pierre Henrotte has been engaged for this position. The other two concerts will take place at Aeolian Hall on Tuesday evenings, January 7 and February 18.

Donnay's "Georgette Lemunier" at the French Theatre

Maurice Donnay, author of "Georgette Lemeunier," the fifth play to be done by the French Theatre du Vieux Colombier in its present repertory, is best known to American playgoers as the author of "Le Retour de Jerusalem," which was acted in English by Mme. Simone as "The Return to Jerusalem" during her last engagement in this city. He is an officer of the Legion of Honor, a member of the French Academy and a member of the Society of Dramatic Authors of France, Men of Letters and French Poets and many other notable and distinguished literary and art societies in his own country.

M. Donnay when asked by a French journalist how many plays he had written replied with naïvetté, "Uone, but I am still hopeful." Notwithstanding this fact his plays have long been conspicuous on the continental stage, and Charles Frohman during his lifetime, was one of his greatest admirers and supporters.

Maurice Donnay was born in Paris in 1859 and was intended by his father to become a civil engineer, but like Brieux and other compatriots the call to write overcame every obstacle and he at once turned his pen to stage writing. His first plays were lost to history, as no copies are obtainable at this time.

But the later record of twenty plays, beginning with "Phryne" in 1891, contains the names of several celebrated successes.

"Le Menage de Moliere" is also from his pen, but the date is not easily fixed. It was written some time since, but only recently given to the public.

It is worthy of note that Donnay's thesis on infidelity is aptly summed up in his dedication to Moliere in this play. "Reassure yourself, 'monsieur,'" he writes, "we of to-day are far from the old French contours and their jokes on infidelity, which you yourself have often revived with so much esprit, or else complacently repeated. The conjugal accident no longer diverts us; it appears to us as a social necessity, yes, a shameful but logical consequence of marriage as it is most frequently practised in the society of our day."

In "Georgette Lemeunier" Donnay writes knowingly of social conditions. It is a story of the bourgeoisie, and Donnay himself was born into this social strata. Rejane made a great success of the part in France.

Who's Who in Current Plays

The production of the big spectacular play of "Freedom" at the Century Theatre marks one of the rare appearances in the theatre of J. Monroe Hewlett as a designer and painter of scenery. Hewlett, who is responsible for the twenty-three scenes in this play, is an architect and decorator by profession, but his occasional productions have caused considerable comment.

It was the late John Alexander, the artist, and Maude Adams who first persuaded Hewlett to turn his attention to the theatre. Hewlett had gone to Paris to study decorating. Miss Adams and Alexander knew his work, and decided he was the man who could best design the scenery for "Chantecler," so they induced him to make his first trial in this line of work. His scenery for "Chantecler" is remembered as being one of the first direct efforts in this country toward the newer art of scenic and lighting effects.

Hewlett is not a realist, nor is he an ultra-modernist in the sense of Leon Bakst, Gordon Craig and Max Reinhardt. Like Edmond Jones, he depends upon extreme simplicity to achieve his effects. His scenes are painted on gauzes rather than on canvas, and thus he is able by the adroit use of lighting to obtain unusual results. In "Freedom" he found a happy medium, for it was essential that, while his scenes bear an historical accuracy, they must have intense illusion blending realism with idealism. Like the famous Continental scene designers, Hewlett depends greatly on lights.

The histrionic gifts of Bruce McRae, hero of David Belas 's production of "Daddies," which moves from the Belasco to the Lyceum Theatre tomorrow night, would seem his right of inheritance. His childhood was spent in the atmosphere of the London stage, where his uncle, Sir Charles Wyndham, was singularly active, and his aunt managed several theatrical companies. Mr. McRae is also the nephew of Bronson Howard, the American playwright.

Strange as it may seem to the layman both uncles, each remarkably successful in his respective line of dramatic art, opposed the young Englishman when, at the age of sixteen summers, his thought turned most naturally to the stage as a suitable outlet for his ability and energy. Sir Charles Wyndham insisted that young McRae gain his knowledge of life through some other medium and Mr. Howard followed suit in declining any aid in establishing his British nephew in the American theatre. So it came about that Mr. McRae served a number of years in land surveying for his government, still others on a sheep ranch in Australia and later in America, herding cattle in the West, before he was able to persuade either relative that in such capacities he was a round peg in a square hole. Eventually Bronson Howard gave the youth a letter of introduction to the late Charles Frohman, who stood sponsor for his dramatic debut. Since this time Mr. McRae has impersonated more stage lovers than any other actor upon the stage—his experience having been confined largely to leading romantic rôles in the theatre.

Said Miss Katherine Proctor, leading woman in "The Matinee Hero," "It pays to understudy after all." That most ungrateful of jobs is worth the time and the heartaches if it leads direct to playing opposite an actor of Mr. Ditrichstein's abilities.

The life of an understudy is not one of unadulterated bliss, for it's all work and no play, to pervert a good old saying. Then, too, there's the oft kindled and rarely satisfied hope that a chance—the chance—may come. Generally it doesn't.

"I started my stage career as understudy for Peter Pan in its opening season. Then I played in several important parts and pieces. But once again I came back to understudying, this time for the two leads in 'The Concert' and the two in 'The Woman.'

"After succeeding Frances Starr in 'The Easiest Way' and starring in stock a season I determined to sit tight until a real part on Broadway should come along and to spurn all understudying as the very plague itself. While thus engaged in sitting my fate again overtook me, but this time it came in a form so irresistible that I succumbed without a struggle, for I had been chosen to understudy all the feminine parts in the 'All-Star' cast of the 'Out There' company when it went out for its three weeks' tour for the benefit of the Red Cross. That is something that I wouldn't have given up for the brightest display on Broadway. And it was as the result of that, no doubt, that my present splendid opportunity came to me."

Georgie Price, not quite seventeen, who has been engaged to be one of the stars of "The Midnight Frolic," began his theatrical career at the age of four, and his first engagement was with a little East Side motion picture hall. His act was to sing a song between each picture and his fee was an ice cream soda and five cents, and there was a clause in the contract which called for the safe escort home of the diminutive actor in case he fell asleep.